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Italian language-History
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"The Language Controversy in Italy."

Controversy begins when there is a consciousness of difference of opinion. That consciousness does not come until some one has challenged our attention. The material for controversy over the Italian language began to be when the first barbarians made their appearance in the Italic peninsula. The interaction of their, so to call it, civilization and the Roman could not but widen the breach that had already made its appearance in the matter of language. It was not until one took his stand against the continuation of the historic, but then out-of-date Latin, that the real controversy was launched.

The thirteenth century, then, may be considered for our purposes, the first important period in the history of the language as well as of the literature. It marked the end of the period of adjustment of the spoken Latin and the barbaric idioms. There had been evolved many jargons from this admixture. All had the basic Latin, but the varying barbaric dialects brought into contact with that Latin had made differences in pronunciation, in elegance of expression, in vocabulary. It was, of course, only natural that the "personal" element should mark unmistakably the resulting dialect of each "group" or "province" or "precinct", as one may wish to call that unit.

Yet these dialects found between the Alps and the Mediterranean, in spite of their differentiation, had a common bond in the Latin background. They were not totally dissimilar as are, for example, the Hebrew and the Gaelic, or the French and the Syriac. Just as in

biology, accidents make us all different in appearance, color, physiognomy, yet we are not entirely dissimilar.

It is easy to see in Cicero's "Satis hoc tempore dictum habeo" the first appearance of a construction with an auxiliary verb not peculiar to earlier Latin authors, or to Horace or to Vergil. From Plantus "caballus" it is easy to trace the very modern "cavallo" of the Italian. Apulejo's "jornus" is not a far cry from our familiar "giorno", and Plantus' "annellus" is but a step between the classical "annullus" and the contemporary "anello". Nor is it difficult to recognize in tenth and eleventh century political documents, the gradual weaning away from the Latin. In those copies of legal transactions that have been preserved to us, we often find parenthetical explanations, in the provincial tongue, of the Latin expression--an indication that the vernacular was very readily understood, and the Latin more or less a formal language.

This period of dialectic incubation lasted from the fourth or fifth century until the twelfth or thirteenth, when we find our first noteworthy instance of a stand against the continuation of Latin and an argument for a vernacular. For the first time it is suggested that an up-to-date idiom be selected as means of expression, an idiom that would satisfactorily take the place of, or better, continue the work of the Latin, which was now falling into disuse and disrepute.

After the appearance of Dante's "De Vulgari Eloquio", Latin was a living language in the learned discourses of latinists only. It is at this period that we find the first indication of a consciousness of disunity in language. Latin had held full sway as the

medium of written expression. No one had questioned its claim as the only legitimate and worthy medium. It is interesting to note how often is found, in the writings of this epoch, the idea of "apt, cultured, noble, graceful, elegant" with respect to expression. The barbaric influence had so thoroly permeated and upset the normal Latin, that Italians were busy for seven centuries, after the fall of Rome, adjusting their language to the new element.

Dante is the first to present the question of a scrutiny of the existing dialects for a "volgare illustre." Let it be borne in mind, that when language is mentioned at this period, the written language is meant. With that, scholars of the thirteenth century are directly concerned, for their task was to find an alternate for Latin, and that was written only.

As was characteristic of serious dissertation in the Middle Ages, Dante began his treatise "ab ovo". He gives reasons for the existence of language, he delves into the evolution of language from the first articulation of primitive man to the highly intricate productions of the classical Greek and Latin. He gives advice as to the use of the language, but of the greatest importance is his dialectical division of Italy. It was this which started the discussion as to which of the dialects should prevail. Of course, this division is purely theoretical, as is characteristic of all pathfinding studies. The "De Vulgari Eloquio," despite its unscientific argument, is considered the constitution of the Italian language. Later critics seem to credit it with being

important merely because it is a first step towards lingual unification of Italy, rather than for the truth and exactness of its content. However, it is still much discussed, tho little read--as Manzoni humorously puts it.

D'Ovidio has commented at length on the treatise. He considers that it is more a treatise on the art of poetics than a discussion of language. After a general discussion on the origin, diffusion, and variation of the vulgar idiom, Dante naturally falls into the discussion of the art of self-expression in this idiom. The idiom discussed is the hypothetical one "quod in qualibet redolet civitate, nec cubat in ulla". Had there been such a one recognized by all, no question would have arisen. But champions arose, claiming for his predilection, the title of "volgare illustre" and the debate began.

Belardinelli in his "Questione della Lingua", argues that when that "volgare illustre"so much sought after, was divested of its mediaeval involucre, it would be found to be that variation spoken by the educated, and written by them. Inasmuch as Tuscany (roughly designated as that portion of Italy between the Po and the Tiber) was the least disturbed by barbaric invasion, freest from foreign political tyranny, it became the rendez-vous of students. It was there that the nobility went to be instructed. Thus, it was only logical that Tuscan,or Florentine,should be the dialects which were used by the educated of all provinces of the country.

There are several reasons why that vulgar idiom, evidently widely known and used, had not appeared in literature--tho it had been recognized as an established idiom since the seventh century. The first

of these is the persistent tradition that these inhabitants, between the Po and the Tiber, were the direct heirs of the Romans and as such should retain the classical idiom. They should keep alive the Roman culture by holding in contempt any upstart dialect that sought to usurp the place of the classical medium.

Thruout northern and southern Italy, where this affinity with the Latin was less felt, the literary vehicle was the dialect, known to those who were writers by education, tinged with the dialectical variations peculiar to that district. Notice the writings of the Sicilian poets of the court of Ferdinand in the twelfth century, and of the north-Italian Giacomino da Verona of approximately the same period. Again, in many of the courts French was the recognized language. So it is that we find French poems among the writings of the Siculean poets which are found among the namuscripts of the San Marco Library in Venice. These poems dealt mainly with the Carolingian legends and may be considered imitations of the primitive "Chanson de Roland". Gaspary is inclined to consider this use of a foreign idiom sufficient proof that no dialect was recognized, at that time, as a literary medium.

The prevalent theory concerning the finding of Tuscan poetry among the Siculean writings is that the poems were first written in the Sicilian dialect and were rendered in Tuscan by Tuscan copyists. The other theory, already mentioned, is that the poets either were Tuscans themselves or had been educated in Tuscany.

Bartoli, in his history of the Italian language suggests that tho Tuscan was not at this time recognized as a written language,

yet it was in process of gaining strength, flexibility and prestige. It needed only a writer to establish it as the language of Italy.

Dante's conception of this hypothetical "volgare illustre" was vague. In fact, Gaspary questions whether Dante meant a language or a poetic diction, or even style. If Dante does mean a language, the treatise shows the author's bias. Belardini and D'Ovidio suggest that the title means merely a vernacular as opposed to the classical Latin, a vernacular which would afford a dignified and modern medium of expression. The content, they consider, is more a discussion on choice of words in this new language for effective poetical expression. In other words, it is a work on poetics.

To uphold this theory that it is more an "ars poetica" than a truly scientific research, it is contended that Dante's concept of grammar was indefinite. That vaguness is not a shortcoming in the Divine Poet, because grammar had not yet taken a set form in his day. Is it possible to have grammar a concrete idea, when the language exists only in the mouths of the people, when no one has ever written in it? How was it possible to formulate grammatical rules before it was recognized that there was law in expression? Grammar Dante defines as "quaedam inalterabilis locutionis identitas diversis temporibus atque locis, nulli singulari arbitrio videtur obnoria, et per consequens, nec variabilis esse potest."

Dante had only a notion of the Italian dialects. He was acquainted with the diversity of speech thruout Italy, but he did not have at hand information that would support his contention. There was no way of obtaining such information and, what is more, proof

was not thought of at this embryonic stage.

Dante considered Tuscan only a type of literature. In his eyes it was not a distinct dialect. The only differences that he recognized between his own Florentine and the Tuscan were those of diction and style.

He had no way of knowing that the so-called early Siculean poetry had been copied and "edited" by Tuscans, (as some scholars claim); that thence had come the idea that Tuscan had had its seat in Sicily.

Dante decried all dialects. There was only one for him to vaunt--the one which he knew, the Florentine. Yet he realized its many imperfections which, in his eyes, disqualfied it from claiming the title of "volgare illustre", tho he did not openly say so.

Other authors of his province were not so reticent. They did not hesitate to praise the beauty and the flexibility of their dialect. Francesco da Barberino in his "Reggimento e Costumi da donna" includes in his advice "e parlerei sol nel volgare toscano". Antonio da Tempo on non-Latin poetics says "Lingua tusca magis apta est ad literam sive literaturam quam aliae linguae, ut ideo, magis communis et intelligibilis". Dante's only comment on Tuscans is "propter amentiam suam infruniti sibi vulgaris illustris arrogare videntur". In the "Convito" he dedicates himself "a perpetuale infamia e dipressione delli malvaggi uomini che commendano lo volgare altrui e lo proprio dispregiano". In this manner he intimates his predilection for his own dialect, but, having in mind that irreproachable pure "volgare illustre" he cannot claim leadership for his own in view of its im-

perfections.

His treatment of language is purely incidental to his advice on poetizing. The points he brings out with regard to standardization of a dialect are contingent upon his discourse upon poetics. The divisions and variations of the language lead Dante inevitably to speak of the dialectal division of Italy. The lack of common language thus revealed starts him in search of a suitable common language which he unofficially disclosed to be the Tuscan.

This search for the common language and the ultimate discovery of one approaching the qualifications set down, constituted the first phase of the language controversy. The language being settled upon, its choice was approved by its use by the three outstanding figures of that age--Dante himself, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. It may now consider its position unassailable.

No better proof of the soundness of the choice can be found than the very fact that, once the language fixed upon, many provinces claimed it for their own. It was the problem of the fifteenth century to determine what province was the legal home of the idiom and thus to find its name. That century must also confirm the choice by discovering in the language such laws as would insure its continuance in all its vigor and beauty. These rules must be derived from the universally admired, recognized sponsors of the language--Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

Trissino's letter to Clement VI and Cardinal Bembo's "Prose della lingua volgare" reflect the popular opinion that the language should be considered the Tuscan.

The "Prose" was a fitting supplement to Dante's theoretical "De Vulgari Eloquio". Dante decides for the dialect everywhere known--that is to say, the Tuscan. Bembo, on the authority of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio decides for a grammar based on the Florentine. "Non si vede ancora che delle leggi e delle regole dello scrivere abbia scritto bastevolmente".

His work is a grammar purely, that is, it is a collection of models from the three authorities of the newly-recognized language. It has no such logical development as we know in grammar today, but it was one more step in the direction of strengthening the claim of the Tuscan.

At the moment when this upstart language began to assume proportions and position of authority, the conservatives made a last great hue and cry in behalf of the classical Latin. It had so magnificently done work in the past! Surely no language could hope to assume the authority, or usurp the place of Latin! Eminent Latin scholars--witness Romolo Amasèo (Bologna 1527) inveighed against the encroachment of the new. There arose in defense of the new, a great number--all those who professed unity of language and who wrote in it. Many were Lombards and Florentines, who had come by Tuscan thru study.

Calmeto suggests, as to the name, that the new language should be called "Cortigiana", by which he meant "quella che dal mescolamento di tutte queste è nata e ora è tra la genti della corte quasi parimenti a ciascuno comune". However that language was, at bottom, Tuscan. The differences were due to local peculiarities and mannerisms.

Bembo replies to that suggestion that to give that name to the language would be to connote that it was a mixed language, which means no language at all. Furthermore such a language would be an impractical one, used only by the élite, while the new language must be universal and practical.

Trissino brings out the fact that at Rome Tuscan was adopted because of its facile pronunciation. "La pronunzia toscana e la pronunzia cortegiana sono le più belle d'Italia". To show his constancy in favoring Tuscan, in his "Grammatichetta"when there is a choice of forms, he always prefers the Tuscan, for the reason that he considered it the more directly derived from the Latin. To him this meant that it must be worthy of being the "volgare illustre".

So this subjective controversy went on. At bottom it was nothing more than Dante's contention worked in the opposite direction. Dante held that one dialect must needs be the most beautiful, the most widely known, the directest descendent of the Latin; hence, that one should be the universal standard. The fifteenth century controversists, having a standard, tried to find reasons for placing its natural home in this or that city or province. It must be borne in mind that this was still the theoretical stage. The practical side will be recognized later.

Bembo has it that it is more important that a language have dignity and nobility than that it have flexibility or catholicity. So he advises "è da vedere che alle nostre composizioni tale forma e tale stato si dia che elle piacere possano in ciascuno età, e a ogni secolo, e a ogni stagione."

But, again, we find an indifferent distinction between language

and literature. Boccaccio and Dante and Petrarch are unrivaled, hence their language is the best. Theirs is the idiom to imitate. The Academia della Crusca followed after this contention for, in compiling their famous dictionary, they considered good those words found in these authors. These words, they asserted, were the most purely Tuscan, and should forever be the best.

Castiglione is of another opinion. The controversy takes a practical twist. Does a standard language admit of variation? He says it is a presumption to hold on to useless words, forms, expressions which have long since gone out from the actual vocabulary.

This turn fixed the relation between the written and the spoken language. Heretofore, as in the old Roman days, there had been a classical language and a spoken or vulgar. The Tuscan that had been the center of controversy was the written Tuscan only. There had been no idea of changing the spoken idiom.

Castiglione would consider legitimate and truly worthy of a place in the language, such words as prove themselves gracious and apt--no matter from what dialect they had sprung. This is an advance toward making the standard language a practical one. Once the language is made popular, its place is incontestable.

No one has so far advanced the point of "a feeling of nationality", and its relation to stabilizing an idiom.

The patch-work of history, characteristic of Italy during the Middle Ages, explains why the idea of nationality was not at the forefront. From the capitulation of Rome, until the revolutionary cycle of the nineteenth century--a period of fourteen hundred years--Italy

was the grab-bag of Europe. That small section which had staunchly withstood foreign domination (thanks to its natural fortresses) was divided against itself politically.

The idea of promoting political unity thru lingual unity was proferred first by Varchi. "Quando anche tutti gli Italiani intendessero il parlare fiorentino e in tutta Italia fosse una medesima lingua (which he denied to be the case) ciò non concluderebbe nulla, perchè non basta intendere e favellare una lingua perchè si possa chiamare nativa, ma bisogna intenderla e favellarla naturalmente senza averla imparata da altri che le balie."

From this point begins the propaganda for the newly-adopted language. This broadcasting the language will grow proportionately with the rise and propagation of a desire for political unity. The controversists who are primarily theorists will become fewer.

Along with the distinction which will be made, hereafter, between dialect and language will come a clear understanding of the distinctions between "province", "state", and "nation".

Machiavelli himself uses the words indifferently. Quoting from his "Dialogo sopra la lingua" we have "Italia, alla quale provincia". Again, we have "la fortuna l'ha (Firenze) fatta celebre per tutte le provincie del mondo". Farther on he divides Italy "nelle sue provincie-Lombardia, Romagna, Toscana-- -------." Trissino refers to the Spaniards and to the Hebrews as "nazioni". Of Tuscany he says "essa nostra nazione", and of Venice, "la regina della provincia d'Italia", showing indiscreet interchanging of terms. This recalls that the subject of community of language had evidently become known

and ordinary, for he jestingly says "appellando io questa lingua, italiana, non fò ingiuria a niuno, siccome non farei ingiuria a Fiorènza dicendo ch'ella è città italiana." Muzio writes "se non vergognano di essere Italiani." It is a healthful sign when a subject is often referred to by many.

As soon as the language question came out of the theorists' laboratory, it was destined to rise or fall according to the truth of their hypotheses.

This leaves us at the threshold of the eighteenth century. That period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we will set aside for the germination of the idea of nationality. The language, during those trying years, found no propagator to carry on the torch lighted by the thirteenth century and flashed again before the world in the fifteenth. France awoke; Italy relapsed into inactivity. Italy awoke in the last half of the nineteenth century to strike for unity. With the inspiration of such leaders as Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour and the House of Savoy, Italy arose to cement the bonds of a people one in ardor, one in belief, one in love of country.

There was keenly felt the lack of a standard language, naturally spoken by all. The dialects had continued along with the language. The educated spoke the language, the uneducated (and they outnumbered the others by far) spoke their peculiar dialect.

With the establishment of a firm government the standard language received recognition. It was the only language taught in the schools. This measure, with the subsequent measure providing for compulsory elementary education, will solve the lingual ills of Italy.

The standard-bearers in the nineteenth century, who are continuing the work started by their illustrious predecessors are D'Azeglio, Conti, Cantù, Alfieri, Giusti, Goldoni, Fogazzaro, and Manzoni. They are the outstanding littérateurs of the past generation. These of the present are still too much with us to judge the value of their contribution. More than any other perhaps, Manzoni has hastened this unification of the language.

As Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante were considered the mentors of the language in the early days, so Manzoni is considered today. No one is better fitted to carry on their work than he, with his facile pen, always graceful, always sympathetic.

Italian language and "Tuscan" are synonomous now. Political unity was achieved in theory in 1870; the war completed it in reality during the years of 1914--1918. Unity of language shall be completed when illiteracy shall have disappeared. Dialects will remain much as do bad grammar and colloquialisms in any language. When all Italians are able to speak andable to write the same idiom, then the controversy shall be closed and the "Marcia Reale" shall be more than a stirring tune. It shall be a song.

"Lingua e nazione è tutt'una."

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